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Mediatized Spirituality: A Critical Appraisal of the Media-Religion Nexus in Nigeria

Abstract

Religion in Nigeria is predominantly manifested in three identifiable forms: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. All three forms, but especially the first two, have in recent years embraced the “media logic,” packaging religious experience in ways that appeal to the media. These religions have adopted the media as platforms for worship, proselytization, image-building and investment. Thus, religion in Nigeria has come under the grip of mediatization, giving rise to a mediatized spiritual experience. This paper contends that the strong infusion of the media into religious life in Nigeria could have both positive and negative implications for society. It advocates a responsible use of the media to curtail the purveyance of hate, incendiary and predatory messages.

Keywords: Nigeria, religion, media, mediatization, online religion.

Introduction

From time immemorial, human beings have been involved in the practice of religion. Yet for scholars, religion is a rather difficult concept to define and there is no single universally accepted definition of religion (Dow, 2007; Harrison, 2006; Kirkland, 1976; Underwood, 2009). Kirkland (1976), however, has pointed out that people share some basic conceptualization of what “religion” is as no one is likely to consider the word as referring to a telephone, an airline or a presidential election. Indeed, a detailed overview of the debate around the definition of religion or even a survey of some definitions is beyond the scope of this paper. I have chosen instead to proffer a working definition to operationalize the concept of religion as it is conceptualized for the purpose of this paper. In this regard, I consider religion as the totality of the human experience, observable or not, that derives from an acknowledgment of a Superior Being with whom people seek to maintain a relationship. Such experience may be manifested in the form of thoughts, beliefs, values, attitudes and actions that may not always be amenable to rational analysis or empirical substantiation. The religious are, therefore, those who consciously engage in such experience.

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In the contemporary world, a lot of people consider themselves adherents of various religions. According to the WIN/Gallup International (2017), 62 percent of people across 68 countries surveyed consider themselves “religious.” In the same poll, 25 percent consider themselves “not religious” while only nine percent consider themselves “atheists.” In Nigeria, religion is an important social institution; it is so important that while completing public documents, citizens are often required to declare their religion. It is, thus, an element of the individual’s identity. But religion in Nigeria goes beyond identity formation. It is part of the warp and weft that have shaped the socio-political structure of the country (Vaughan, 2016). There are three predominant religions, namely Islam, Christianity and the African Traditional Religion (George & Amusan, 2012; Kitause & Achinuke, 2013). It is estimated that 50 percent of Nigerians practise Islam, 40 percent practise Christianity and 10 percent practise either the African Traditional Religion or no religion at all (George & Amusan, 2012). These statistics indicate that in terms of religious persuasion, Nigerians are predominantly Muslims or Christians; nevertheless, George and Amusan (2012) also note that these two major religions are not entirely bereft of some influence from the African Traditional Religion.

Although religions may differ in their spiritual, theological and liturgical practices, they share a common belief in the existence of God, who rules in the affairs of the universe (Roberts, Odumosu & Nabofa, 2009). Another significant commonality among religions nowadays is their growing use of, and apparent dependence on, the media. In this article, I wish to analyse the manifestation of this relationship between religion and the media from both historical and contemporary perspectives, using Nigeria as a case study. This intervention is meant to give an account of the linkages between religion and the media from the standpoint of a developing country, with all the challenges of potential religion-induced upheavals. My argument is that religion and the media have become inexorably fused and I support this stand by drawing on extant literature and my personal observation of the religious landscape in Nigeria. Adherents of Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religions all seem to agree on the potency of the media as tools for propagating their religious beliefs (Kitause & Achunike, 2013) and have submitted to the logic of the media in their religious practices. In this paper, it is my contention that media are no longer mere tools in the hands of the major religions in Nigeria; they have become strongly fused into contemporary religious experience. I will seek to explore this fusion of media and religion in Nigeria through the concept of “mediatized spirituality.” In the context of this paper, mediatized spirituality denotes the emergent tendency for the media to make religion a ubiquitous experience. In other words, mediatized spirituality denotes a spiritual experience that is delivered or practised through, and surrounded by, the media, especially when there is a manifest dependency of such experience on the media. I contend that by virtue of the infusion of the media, religious participation in contemporary Nigeria is no longer restricted by time, space or physical presence. Religion nowadays transcends these common barriers and, by submitting to the logic of the media, delivers an experience that is disembodied, distance-agnostic, often commodified and increasingly mobile. I will discuss the implications of the institutionalization of the media in the religious experience of a heterogenic society like Nigeria. A discussion of the perspectives for understanding the interaction of religion and the media at the global level will dovetail into an exploration of the historical relationship between religion and the media in Nigeria with a view to establishing the trajectory of the apparent institutionalization of the media in the contemporary religious experience of Nigerians.

Contextualising the nexus

Religion and the media are major social institutions. Both are implicated in the effort of society to socialize its members and regulate their conduct; it is unthinkable to have a society without them (Oluwole, Oni & Oluwole, 2015). Religion can effectively be used as an instrument for creating social cohesion as well as a tinderbox of socio-political crises. Indeed, the power of religion for good or evil, depending on application, is not in doubt. According to Hazleton (2009, cited in Khroul, 2014), Ali Sharyati, an Iranian sociologist, has pointed out that “religion is an amazing phenomenon that plays contradictory roles in people’s lives. It can destroy or revitalize, put to sleep or awaken, enslave or emancipate, teach docility or teach revolt.” The case of Nigeria is often illustrative of this thesis. The country is a pluralistic society, with the major religions often competing with one another and precipitating conflicts (Ngbea & Achunike, 2014; Roberts, Odumosu & Nabofa, 2009) which sometimes assume political or ethnic colourations. The sociopolitical history of Nigeria, as a nation, has often been punctuated with religion-inspired or religion-related crises. This topos of perpetual religious crisis has become a fertile ground for scholarship and some of the recent discourses engaging this theme in Nigeria include Afolabi (2015), Malasowe (2016), Oshewolo and Maren (2015) and Toki, Ibrahim and Abdulraheem (2015). Hackett (2009) identifies potential causes of conflict as inequitable access to the media, defamation, encroachment and consumerism. In the light of this, the institutionalization of the media in religion further enhances the innate reach of religion and its potency to build or destroy. Studying the interaction of religion and the media, therefore, becomes an intriguing scholarly imperative in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious society such as Nigeria.

Nowadays, any attempt to study religion will of necessity also consider the media through which it is manifested, since the media have become an important source of religious information and a platform for canvassing and defending one’s faith (Lynch, Mitchell & Strhan, 2012). So the media landscape can often become a contested space for disparate religious persuasions. Significantly, it has been suggested that the media, among other factors, have played a very important role in supporting personalized religion. According to Stout (2012), through the media, “religious information can be stored, accessed, and shared in ways not possible in the past. Counsel from clergy is instantly available online, for example. Participation in religious discussion is immediate through computers and hand-held devices; one doesn’t have to drive to a building to hear a sermon or interact with one’s fellow parishioners” (p.11). Hoover (2006a) has argued that several developments pertaining to religion, religious practices and icons of religion as purveyed by the media are among the reasons the media have become a critical source of the religious imaginary. Thus, separating religion from the media is no longer an easy task.

As Stout (2012) points out, the media-religion nexus has become part of everyday reality. “The media are everywhere” appears to have assumed the status of an aphorism for which proof is neither sought nor given. In a similar vein, it has been said that “religion is everywhere” (Mazur & McCarthy, 2011, p.2). Although that statement was made about the American popular culture, it is one I suspect people in various parts of the globe can relate to. Now, it appears we have religion and the media everywhere. This ubiquity of the media and religion means that “religious media are found in houses of worship, but also in one’s own home. Religious conversations can be face-to-face, but they’re often mediated.... The lesson learned

from history is that traditional media endure, but are now combined with new technologies to create multiple ways of mediating religion today” (Stout, 2012, p.20).

Unfortunately, the definition of the media does not easily resolve into any consensus. Potter (2013) has sought to resolve the definitional tangle by, among other things, drawing a distinction between “media” and “mass media.” On the other hand, Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant and Kelly (2009) have noted the “slippery” nature of the term “media” (p.9) even though it has been in use for about 60 years. They point out that the concept of the media usually includes the communication media, the disparate organisations and people working within media institutions and the output of those institutions. Although they draw some distinction between “old” and “new” media (p.9) they highlight the transmedial nature of the modern media such that content flows easily from one media form to another. These distinctions from the academic viewpoint may not always reflect the perspectives of media consumers (Lynch, Mitchell & Strhan, 2012). It therefore suffices for the purpose of this article that I take a broad view of the media. Proceeding from this premise, it is apt to agree with McQuail’s (2010) assertion that the media provide “occasions, links, channels, arenas and platforms for information and ideas to circulate” (p.8). For this article, the concept of the media includes traditional media forms like television, radio, billboards, books, posters, film and more recent forms like mobile phones, the Internet, social media, and so on. This article takes a sociological view of the interaction or fusion of religion and the media. It considers such interactions at the societal level.

Religion and the media: a historical glance

Religion and the media certainly have some affinity, no matter how hazy it may appear at first. Both religion and media deal with communication of various types – oral, written and non-verbal. In ancient Egypt, competence in the use of hieroglyphs (translated as “words of gods”) or hieroglyphic writing was almost the exclusive preserve of scribes and priests (Beard, 2007). Furthermore, the prominent role of writing in Judaism and Christianity have earned them the description of “religions of the book” notwithstanding that the apparent role of writing in other religions is also evident (Beard, 2007). For instance, books (a media form) have been an integral part of the knowledge preservation and religious pedagogy of many of the world’s organized religions (Frasca, 2006). Although the relationship between religion and the media has captivated the interest of scholars in recent years (van Zoonen, 2011) it is instructive to understand that such relationship is not new. According to Hoover (2002, cited in Khroul 2014):

In fact, religion and media have been closely linked since at least the Reformation, and it is axiomatic that modes of communication we might also call “media,” such as oral performance, ritual and dress, are fundamental to our understanding of pre-Reformation religion as well. Thus, when we contemplate questions of the fate of religion in an age dominated by the media we should start with the realization, that as a system of meaning and signification, religion has always been inextricably linked to modes of communication.

Elsewhere, Hoover (2006b) points out that religions and their cultures have always been partly defined by the media by which they are “remembered, ritualized, expressed and passed on.” To him, developments in economic, political and technological fields have conditioned

people's perception of religious media considering that, over time, some media that were originally perceived as media of religion have now morphed into modern media of communication. In a similar vein, Stout (2006) opines that communication is an essential part of religion as seen in prayer, sermons, ritual and organizational fellowship. He rues the study of religion and communication in disparate disciplines with "few epistemological bridges" between them (p.xiii).

Considering the link between religion and the media, it is not surprising that the invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg in 1450 became a watershed not only for media and publishing, but also for religion. Before the advent of the printing press, bibles and religious tracts were laboriously copied by scribes, one copy at a time, with the tedium of such strenuous work and the high probability of mistakes blighting the various copies thus hand-copied (Frasca, 2006). Little wonder that "the Gutenberg Bible" (also known as "the 42-line Bible" because it *has* 42 lines on each page) enjoys the controversial fame of being regarded as the first book ever printed from movable metal type, with the distinction of having been printed by Johann Gutenberg himself – a claim that some scholars have rejected (Bryan & Rice, 1960).

The controversies aside, it is indubitable that the invention of the printing press had a powerful impact on various religions, especially the Christian religion. The early days of printing witnessed the proliferation of printers whose major production outputs were bibles and religious literature which gave churches the opportunity to standardize liturgy and doctrines, while spreading the knowledge of their faiths to masses of people in such an economical manner that was thitherto impossible (Frasca, 2006). It has equally been suggested that the advent of printing facilitated the Reformation of the church as Martin Luther not only nailed his "Ninety-five Theses" against Catholicism on the door of the university, but also published it in a book form and had it widely distributed (Frasca, 2006). As Frasca (2006) further notes, publishing became so powerful that it has, at various times, attracted the censoring and licensing interest of various political actors.

According to Hoover (2006b), religious publishing played a pioneering role within the printing industry in the United States of America. He points out that, over time, as the electronic media developed, religious programmes were among the earliest fare on radio, with the radio preacher becoming a regular feature of late-night broadcasts while the production of religion themed films also gave impetus to the potential for the mediation of religion. Considering that the communication of religious content was originally premised on a "face-to-face exchange" (Khroul, 2014), mediatized spirituality, therefore, also connotes the idea of disembodied religion or religion at a distance.

Theoretical frameworks for the study of religion and the media

As noted earlier, there has been a great interest among scholars in the study of religion and the media. Van Zoonen (2011) has, consequently, identified four broad approaches, namely: similarity, distinction, articulation and mediatization. These approaches are summarized below based on the quoted work and the views of other scholars that are cited as necessary.

Similarity: This approach views religion and media as similar in that religion can be considered a medium through which humans relate to God. In this context, religion is compared

to the media in its use of symbols, icons and stories as sense-making devices. On the other hand, the media have also been likened to religion which manifests not only in dedicated religious media and websites but also in common religious-sounding expressions which have been used to describe media experiences. Examples of such expressions used by different authors are: “holy grounds,” “temples of the earthbound gods” or “the new cathedrals” (for stadium) and “ersatz religion” or “substitute religion” (for football). In a similar vein, music has been framed in religious terms due to its subculture- and community-building proclivities. To support the approach of equating religion and media, Peters (1999 cited in Hoover, 2011) has shown that theories of media and communication have religious origins. Hent de Vries and Stewart Hoover are among the proponents of the similarity approach.

Distinction: Within this paradigm, religion and media are perceived as two separate social institutions in a competitive or adversarial relationship. The suspicious relationship between these two institutions sometimes manifests in the form of attempts to censor or ban media products in various parts of the world. For instance, some Christians have called for the banning of the Harry Potter series because of their perceived “occult and paranormal content.” Moreover, the television has been blamed for the secularization of society and the transformation of the religious imagination of young people. These views stem from a conception of the media as being so powerful as to overwhelm the ability of the individual to construct their own meaning and resist undue influence.

Articulation: This paradigm seeks to put responsibility for the interaction between religion and media squarely within the lived experience of the individual. The articulation approach argues that the point of departure for the study of religion and the media ought to be the people themselves in order to unravel how these two institutions are similar or separated in their lived religious experience. Thus, this paradigm assumes the ontological possibility that people may experience religion as similar to the media, separated from the media or totally mediatized.

Mediatization: This theory postulates that the media have so much pervaded religion that they have taken over the function of moulding the religious imagination, while religion itself has submitted to the logic of the media. According to some authors, the branding of religion, which gives it a commercial colouration, is a confirmation of the mediatized nature of modern religion. Moreover, for some scholars, the presence of religious institutions online and the availability of purely “online religion” offering a platform to the individual experience of religion are all indications of the extent of religious mediatization.

Hjarvard (2008a), a leading proponent of this approach, argues that religion and media have become so intertwined that they can no longer be studied as separate institutions. Hoover (2012) concurs with this assertion and suggests that to understand religion in the twenty-first century, one needs to understand the media as well and how they contribute to the remaking of religion. This researcher finds the mediatization perspective quite apposite in the case of Nigeria considering the deep entrenchment of the media in the Nigerian religious experience, as will be demonstrated in the next section. Hjarvard (2008a) argues that religion is mediatized through the re-sacralization of religion or its secularization by the media. To him, the media have usurped the role of religious institutions as a framer of religious imagination or purveyor of religious ideas. In fact, the ubiquity of religious influences has been succinctly captured by Feldt (2016): “Today, many competing narratives offer resources for religiosity

and many free-floating religious expressions and mediated ritual scripts guide individuals on how to relate their lives to the religious field.”

My submission is that to the extent that religious events are staged as media events and religious organizations are cognizant of the influence of the media and submit to their logic, we could consider religion in Nigeria as an increasingly mediatized experience, hence the concept of mediatized spirituality on which this paper is anchored. In contemporary Nigeria, religion sans the media is unimaginable; it would amount to a relapse into primitivity. To echo Hjarvard (2016), the media are now so embedded in religion in the country that they have become an essential part of “doing religion.” Mediatization forms the theoretical lens through which this article analyses the connection between religion and the media in Nigeria. The idea of the mediatization of religion is anchored on the theory of mediatization, which is “the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic” (Hjarvard, 2008b). Through the process of mediatization, the media are not only embedded in the activities of other social institutions but have also become institutions in their own right (Hjarvard, 2008b). Media logic – or what Hjarvard also refers to as the *modus operandi* of the media – denotes the peculiar technological and operational arrangements through which the media discharge their functions. McQuail (2010) states that “because of the increased centrality of mass media for other institutions, there is an imperative to conduct affairs and stage events in ways that conform to the needs and routines of the mass media (in respect of timing and form)” (p.330). In other words, submitting to the logic of the media means, at the risk of oversimplification, packaging content, events, news or programmes in a manner that conforms to the requirements of the media. Schulz (2004) refers to this effort to adapt to the requirements of the media as “accommodation.” The goal is to attract and satisfy the audience (McQuail, 2010). Hjarvard (2008a) draws a sharp contrast between mediation (which is simply the process of transmitting communication through a medium) and mediatization (which is a more drawn out process in which social institutions and interactional practices undergo transformation because of the significance of the media). Mediatization appears to have gained such prominence in scholarly discourse that it has often been placed on a similar conceptual pedestal as other metaprocesses in society such as globalization, individualization and commercialization or market economy (Krotz, 2007; Schulz, 2004), which underscores the significance of the theory as an analytical frame. It has been suggested, however, that the mediatization of religion is not a universal phenomenon, but a manifestation in contemporary Western societies where the media have assumed independence (Hjarvard, 2008a). The limits of this assertion must be clear to Hjarvard as he has noted elsewhere (Hjarvard, 2008b) that, with the march of globalization, more societies will experience mediatization. As will become obvious, mediatization of religion – or other social phenomena, for that matter – transgresses continental boundaries.

Religious experience and the media in Nigeria

Statistics from the WIN/Gallup International’s (2017) survey indicate that Nigerians are among the most religious people in the world (WIN-Gallup, 2017). With 97 percent of respondents claiming to be “religious” in the poll, Nigeria comes only second to Thailand as the most religious country in the world. Oni, Oloyede and Ifeduba (2013) have opined that religious identity is salient in Nigeria because people identify themselves by their religious

inclinations. Moreover, they argue, religious organizations have become an integral part of the nation's social reality, while their proliferation is having a huge impact on development. So, Nigeria is an empirically viable and vibrant locale for studying the interaction of religion and the media.

A valid exploration of the institutionalization of the media in the Nigerian religious experience requires a clear understanding of the antecedents of such a development. To put the situation in its proper context, a brief review of the history of the Nigerian mass media is necessary. Either by sheer coincidence or design, the first regular Nigerian newspaper and Africa's first vernacular newspaper, *Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba Ati Yoruba* (*Iwe Irohin*, for short) was established in 1859 at Abeokuta by Reverend Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society (Akinfeleye, 1985). Initially, the newspaper carried only religious news; later, it added non-religious news items but excluded crime reports, nudity, news considered immoral and the promotion of alcohol (Akinfeleye, 1985).

According to Akinfeleye (1985), in the course of time, other churches and even the Nigerian Muslim Society established their own newspapers. It is therefore a fact that although secular publications played a prominent role in Nigeria's quest for independence, it was religious publications that pioneered the advent of the Nigerian press. In a study that surveyed the impact of Christian organizations on the development of mass communication in Nigeria, Oni, Oloyede and Ifeduba (2013) posited that Christian organizations played a significant role in the development of newspaper/magazine publishing, printing and broadcasting – in other words, the Nigerian mass media. There is hardly any religious organization of note without a publishing arm. Religious literature (in the form of daily devotionals, pamphlets, magazines, tracts and motivational books) is widely circulated within the major churches not only as a faith-building tool but also a revenue earner. The role of religious organizations in broadcasting is equally interesting. In spite of the statutory prohibition of the granting of broadcast licenses to religious organizations, churches manage to use platforms provided by broadcast stations owned by non-religious organizations to keep their messages on the air waves (Oni, Oloyede & Ifeduba, 2013).

There is no doubt that religious organizations consider the media as powerful vehicles through which they can convey the messages of their faith to both their adherents and non-adherents, hence the apparently huge interest and investment in the media. But it gets more profound. The media have permeated religion; and religion has permeated the media. According to Marshall-Fratani (1998): "In recent years, nearly all ministries and missions in Nigeria have become producers of some form of print and /or audio and video production. More and more services, rallies, revivals and assemblies are videotaped as well as audiotaped and sold to members, distributed to various shops, interdenominational groups or simply passed from hand to hand."

In addition, Marshall-Fratani (1998) reports the appearance of often short-lived "born-again" weeklies; the huge number of local and foreign tracts/booklets sold at various Christian bookshops and by itinerant booksellers, and the proliferation of videos of religious events or films available for rental at shops. And this was in the 1990s. Today, the religious landscape of Nigeria has grown into a burgeoning media-sphere. Some churches now own satellite television channels (Obayi & Edogor, 2016) and use digital media to communicate (Obayi & Onyebuchi, 2014), in addition to the regular print and broadcast media. In 2016, I counted the religious channels available on *MyTV*, a popular satellite pay-TV service with several free-to-air channels. I realised that the service alone offered Nigerians over 60 free-to-air religious chan-

nels, transmitting programmes focused on Islam or Christianity. Some Nigerian churches whose satellite channels are available on *MyTV* are Synagogue of All Nations, Mountain of Fire and Miracles, the Lord's Chosen Charismatic Revival Movement, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), the Kingsway Christian Centre (KICC), among several others. Owning media outlets enables religious organizations to exercise more control over the content purveyed than otherwise would be possible on secular media (Hjarvard, 2016).

Churches and their pastors have also embraced the social media as platforms of engagement with members and non-members alike. And they do have a following. For instance, as at November 11, 2017, the official Facebook page of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) had 434,154 followers while that of the Christ Embassy had 283,890. According to the information on his Twitter handle, the General Overseer of RCCG, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, joined Twitter in January 2011. In less than seven years, he had sent 10,100 tweets (an average of about four a day) and had 403,000 followers. What this means is that with a single tweet, the pastor can potentially reach more than 400,000 people, a reach that no physical structure can easily deliver. Such potentialities are not lost on religious bodies, hence their heavy investment in the media. Even a church like the Deeper Life Bible Church, which originally was opposed to the use of television, has made a volte-face; it not only airs its programmes on television but also has a satellite television network of its own (Oloyede, Oni & Oluwole, 2015).

However, the presence of the media is not only felt through the worship experience carried on the media but also through the massive deployment of advertising in the print, broadcast and out-of-home media, complemented with a host of branded marketing collateral such as pens, vests and key-holders (Chiluwa, 2013). It is important to state here that the institutionalization of the media on the Nigerian religious landscape is not an entirely Christian phenomenon. The media have also become an integral part of the Islamic religious experience. The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, the preeminent Islamic body in Nigeria, not only has a website but also a Facebook page with over 30,183 followers (as of November 11, 2017). In a similar vein, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria led by Sheikh Ibraheem Zakzaky, has both a website and a YouTube channel through which it canvasses its brand of Islam. In the wake of a bloody clash between the movement and the Nigerian army in Zaria in December 2015, the leader of the group was arrested (Vanguard, 2015). At the time of writing the initial draft of this paper in 2016, 14 of the 26 prominently displayed news items on the movement's website had to do with a demand for the release of Zakzaky. On the other hand, some titles on the movement's YouTube channel (for instance, "The ongoing war against Islam," "Zaria massacre and fabrications," "Nigerian and Kaduna state governments: you cannot stop us") not only speak to the radical bent of the movement but also instantiates its belief in the power of the media to project its own perception of reality. All these corroborate Marshall-Fratani's (1998) argument that the media are as much implicated in Islamic processes as they are within the Pentecostal arms of the Christian religion.

We cannot but also mention, even in passing, the enormous potential of the mobile phone as a medium of religious experience. Today, there are over 150 million mobile connections in Nigeria (NCC, 2016) owned by 86 million unique subscribers (GSMA, 2016). Nigeria also has over 93 million Internet users, the highest in Africa (Internetworldstats.com, 2017). The number is about 48 percent of the country's estimated population. Interestingly, considering that 93 percent of Nigerians online access the Internet through their mobile phones (Ericsson, 2015), it is safe to infer that a good proportion of online religious content is accessed

through the mobile phone. Moreover, in this researcher's experience, it has become fairly common to receive religious messages – Christian or Islamic – as short message service (SMS) on the mobile phone. Praying through the phone is also a common practice as a lot of churches have dedicated prayer lines through which people in need of prayers can have that desire fulfilled without stepping away from their current location. Preliminary results from a new study by this researcher on the use of mobile phones for religious purposes indicate that a good number of people not only go to church with their mobile phones but also access religious content – including the Bible, study materials, hymns – through the mobile. It may not be an exaggeration to imagine that in the foreseeable future, the mobile phone could become a one-stop platform for all things religious in the life of the Christian.

At the same time, online religion is becoming popular among some churches. It is now possible to worship within the comfort of one's home and partake in usually off-line worship activities like the "holy communion," healing and "foot-washing" which are now easily conducted online (Chiluwa, 2013). All an online worshipper needs to do is to provide the necessary ritual items and follow the pastor's instructions on the screen. Churches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God and the Living Faith Church have integrated online offering collection into their websites to enable members to contribute to the churches using their credit cards (Chiluwa, 2012). It is significant to note that some online worshippers have reported receiving miracles simply by experiencing worship via the computer screen (Chiluwa, 2012). Add the massive online presence of many religious organizations in Nigeria, and the picture of the institutionalization of the media in religious experience assumes a well-rounded portrayal.

Implications for the society

That the media have, for a long time, played a major role in religion is not in doubt. However, their seeming omnipresence in contemporary everyday religious practice and experience appears to be one of the outgrowths of post-modernity in which the media have become an integral part of many institutions, a concept termed mediatization. The implications for society and the individual could be dual-faceted – positive or negative. On the positive side, the media help religions reinforce their beliefs to adherents, while seeking to evangelize non-adherents.

Einstein (2008) and Hoover (2012) explain the risen profile of the media in religion in terms of the apparent competitive pressures in both the religious and media marketplaces. Thus, while religious bodies seek growth in their memberships, media establishments seek growth in their audiences. This may not necessarily be an unwelcome development as proselytization had always been an integral part of religion. The media have only taken it beyond a face-to-face encounter. It is, of course, arguable that the marketization and commodification of religion, especially among the prosperity and miracle-focused organisations, may de-sacralise an otherwise sacred institution. A footnote here is that Einstein's (2008) *Brands of faith* offers a detailed account of these developments from a global perspective, while Percy (2000) argues strongly that religion and the market have never been strictly separated as the praxis of the market bears striking semblance to – and appears to have been borrowed from – religious practice. On his part, Ihejirika (2009) argues that the heavy use of the media by religious organizations aligns with the African practice of letting others know how successful one has been. Thus, a heavy presence on the media signals that the religious group is a strong spiritual force.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that media have the uncanny ability to give religious messages “wings” by overcoming the constraints of time, space and embodiment. The institutionalization of the media has the potential to enable the individual that is not physically present within their community of believers to participate vicariously or virtually in the worship experience. As Chiluiwa (2012) argues, online worship, for instance, enables the worshipper to participate in two disparate worship activities or change churches or religions at will. There is indeed a growing recognition that the media today offer the individual a “religious buffet” from which to choose and construct their religious identity (Hoover, 2012).

On the negative side, however, there is a great likelihood for the pressure occasioned by the use of the media to turn a spiritual experience into a hollow stage performance, whose audience is hardly present (Marshall-Fratani, 1998). In Nigeria today, watching some preachers and miracle workers on television often impresses on the mind a sense of meticulous choreographing of stage performances before appreciative audiences, rather than *congregations*. Religious experiences, under such circumstances, are often imbued with a certain cinematic effect. What is more, the overwhelming presence of the media, as noted earlier, may lead to the secularization of the sacred while the extreme commercialism inherent in the brand-building activities of religious sects may turn religion into a marketplace of sorts. It is also possible the heavy use of the media in religious experience could foster a virtual religious experience in which participants are atomized without any sense of communality. In the case of online worship, the home fellowship system of some churches, which ordinarily fosters growth and communality, could become endangered (Chiluiwa, 2012). Moreover, online worship raises the potential risk of some people falling victim to the deceptive practices of unscrupulous preachers (Chiluiwa, 2012), which in turn raises more ethical concerns about online religion.

Again, the speed at which religious information travels on the media (a positive attribute) could also become problematic: weird and unwholesome religious ideas could travel so fast and wreak havoc before being arrested. Radical sects or even insurgents, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, are also known to use the media, especially social media like Twitter and YouTube, to propagate their hate messages, with the aim of proselytizing and radicalizing young people. In a study that analysed tweets on the Boko Haram insurgency (including those from the sect itself), Chiluiwa and Adegoke (2013) discovered that the sect was casting their attacks in a positive light. The sect claimed that as a result of their attacks (couched as good work), husbands now went home early to their families, supposed immoral music had disappeared from the airwaves and looters of public funds had disappeared, among other supposed “benefits.” The sect does not regard itself as “terrorists”; instead, it accuses the Nigerian government of terrorism. How does the sect’s framing of its activities using the media mould the ethical imagination of the youth? Is there a possibility that its use of the media can earn it the sympathy of young people? There are no easy answers to these questions.

From a critical perspective, it can also be argued that the institutionalization of the media in religious experience enables the religious bourgeoisie (the overseers, pastors, imams, *etc.*) to lord their ideas over the masses in order to perpetuate a spiritual subjugation that ensures the survival of their capitalist tendencies cloaked as religion. In Nigeria, some religious organizations take on the look and feel of business empires, run on the profit principle. Ihejirika (2009) points out that some media (posters and handbills, for example) play the role of marketing Pentecostal church leaders or founders and their wives, who appear to revel in “self-exhibitionism.” Again, it has been stated that Nigerian churches, especially those of the

pentecostal persuasion, often anchor their sermons on the gospel of wealth and prosperity (Duke, 2014; Okoli & Uhembe, 2014). As if to validate this critical stance, the language of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria espouses the act of “sowing” – which means giving bountifully to the church and the pastor in the hope of “reaping” the prosperity rewards in due course. Significantly, pastors of some of these churches live in unimaginable opulence in a country where over 88 million people live in “multidimensional poverty” according to UNDP (2015), making it one of the worst five of such countries.

This situation raises some existential questions: could this focus on prosperity, as portrayed on the media, predispose some members of these churches – or even the larger society reached through the media – to corruption? Is there any nexus between prosperity gospel and corruption? How is the imagination of the youth affected by a religious milieu that appears to condition them to view spiritual growth in pecuniary terms? These issues merit further scholarly exploration in a country that is waging its greatest war ever against corruption and armed insurgency.

Conclusion

The institutionalization of the media in the Nigerian religious experience appears to be a *fait accompli* with potentially positive and negative consequences for both society and the individual. It is not likely that both religion and the media will remain the same. It has become a scholarly imperative to continuously study how the relationship between these two critical social institutions evolve over time with a view to comprehending the emergent impact on society and the individual.

As has been demonstrated, the institutionalization of the media in religious experience thrusts enormous powers in the hands of religious leaders. In the age of the Internet, it is often difficult to control the way this power is deployed especially toward young, impressionable minds. The Government needs to consider the establishment of viable platforms for inter-religious dialogue at various levels to foster inter-religious understanding and discourage irredentist religious communication that can engender crises or promote the radicalization of some segments of the society. A society like Nigeria that has often witnessed religion-inspired violence certainly needs a platform for moderating the purveyance of hate and predatory religious messages without curtailing people’s freedom of expression and religious choice. Mediatized spirituality is already the new normal. Making it contribute to harmonious co-existence and social progress is the real challenge before critical stakeholders such as the media themselves, government and religious bodies.

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